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ABSTRACT

In considering the organizational functions of school systems, the following assumptions need to be examined: client achievement cannot be used as a major index of organizational health; organizational functioning relates closely to the utilization of available human and material resources; maximizing available resources increases organizational adaptability to change; and schools have limitations and need to recognize them. Characteristics leading to an assessment of organizational health include clearly stated purposes and responsibilities, a systematic process for evaluation, a built-in spirit and attitude toward change, and an ability to utilize influence as a feedback mechanism for growth and development. Such characteristics permit school systems to retain their uniqueness relative to their own situations. Procedures for gaining control over the above characteristics would vary from school system to school system. However, the outcome for different school systems should be the same; improved efficiency and productivity could result in better educational opportunities for the children and community. (Author/JG)

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ASSESSING THE ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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Traditionally, increased criticism of schools tends to follow periods of local, state, and national economic crises. Such criticism seems to focus on the management of schools and tends to raise questions regarding the efficiency of school operations and the persistent problem of balancing expectations with actual school functions.

The pursuit of criticisms solely motivated by temporary or persistent economic crises, can be misleading and unproductive if the organizational response is merely to reduce expenditures. Consequently, schools do need to raise questions about their management profiles and how well they are using and doing with what they have. Indeed, an organizational response to financial crises could lead to more creative and innovative approaches to problem solving that can serve the schools well.

One way of conceptualing a productive school response to its own governance is to develop an organizational assessment predicated on its own resources. By resources is meant the sum of human and technological attributes held or available to an organization in manifesting its purpose. Simply stated, what and who is available to do what has to be done. Ergo, a healthy school organization is one that is aware of what it has and what is needed in order to define and achieve its purpose.

The advantages of conceptualing school systems as healthy in this framework are several. Specifically, they are:

1. Any organization must be fully aware of its strengths and weaknesses in order to capitalize on its strengths and develop its weaknesses.

2. An awareness of organizational weaknesses is in itself a strength that leads to growth.

3. Social organizations will always be confronted with conflicting expectations for their performance. The purpose of defining expectations by the organization is to reduce such conflict within the ranks of organization members.

4. Organizations, particularly those serving the public, need successes to reduce their vulnerability to criticism and to establish a basis for future growth. Thus achieveable outcomes are essential for organizational well-being.

Some Assumptions about School Organizations

A related question to school system health has often been raised namely "How good are the schools"? Such a question does not address itself directly to how well a school system functions as an organization. In most cases, such a question seeks responses related to one output of schools, namely, student achievement.

Assessing the organizational functions of a school system from such a framework is at best spurious. There appears at this time a sense of unanimity in the education profession that student achievement is a result of many factors, some of which may directly relate to organizational factors.

This factor is one of the underlying assumptions made in outlining the problem of this paper. In my judgment this point needs to be underscored by professionals and non-professionals affiliated with schools. Re-stated, the first assumption is that client achievement in public schools must be seen in a multiple causality framework reflecting some organizational factors. This assumption has serious professional and ethical implications in the way school managers tend to view the achievements of their clients as indices of their own proficiencies. In addition, serious questions should be raised

regarding comparative evaluations of schools, from this criterion, particularly urban to non-urban school settings. Not to be discounted are the implications of some accountability systems for schools directly related to student achievement. These last two points deserve far greater discussion, however, then time allows within the contents of this paper.

A second assumption of this paper is that schools are social systems that are compatible to scientific inquiry. Since inquiry has been systematically conducted on organizations in both private and public sectors in our society, empirical and theoretical models generated from such study have implications for schools. As a result of such studies, it can be stated that organizational functioning relates closely to the utilization and job functioning of the human and material resources available. Therefore, an integral part of assessing school organizational health lies in the relationships existing within the social and political boundaries of the school system. Insufficient, but existing relationships; inadequate or non-existing relationship; and non-stated relationship, are indices of organizational pathology that need to be identified and dealt with by a school system.

My third assumption relates to the correction of identified pathologies as a means of increasing the utilization and job functioning of human and material resources. Maximizing such resources increases the dynamic state or organizations thereby making it more amenable to change and program adaptability. Given a higher state of organizational adaptability, increased outcomes should be realized through increased productivity of resources.

A fourth assumption imperative in managing school systems is the need to sort out and accept as responsibilities those operations an organization has the greatest control over. Historically, schools have tended to directly or tangentially become involved in areas that are beyond their resources, jurisdiction, and limits or responsibility. Practically and conceptually, schools must realize their own limitations. This is necessary in order to direct productive energy to areas where control of necessary variables is possible. Many times, the decision-making process is totally contaminated by the futility of pursuing problem areas beyond the scope of existing resources and reality. Examples can be drawn from the actual teaching-learning process to food service operations in school systems. An attitude should exist among school managers that what they can do, should be done well; while what they can't do, should not be attempted.

Given the foregoing assumptions, certain characteristics can be stated regarding healthy school organizations. After the stating of such characteristics and their implications for the management of school systems, a working definition of a viable school organization may be drawn. Such a definition could represent a jumping off point for self assessment in local school districts.

Characteristics Leading to Assessment

CHARACTERISTIC I.

How clearly are purposes, functions, and potential organizational outcomes stated in a realistic and understandable manner?

Of paramount importance in any organization, and foremost as a measure of the leadership of managers in school settings, is an awareness of purpose and responsibility. Awareness of responsibilities helps in developing strategies focused on outcomes. It is important to have these responsibilities in written form. A simple procedure as writing down responsibilities of the school system could be a very difficult task. The value of having responsibilities written and available for scrutiny by members of the organization, is important to develop the necessary psychological commitment to their fulfillment. Upon having established responsibilities, a school district is in a position to establish priorities. Priorities are very important in organizational life since they provide a basis for the allocation of resources, both human and material, available to the organization. Priorities also enable a school system to evaluate its accomplishments up to a given point while still providing a sense of what still needs to be done.

As part of establishing direction and thrust for the organization, it is necessary to have these plans shared by the participating staff of the school system. This will enable school managers to develop the necessary support systems among the staff that are needed in developing and implementing proposed strategies. In many respects this characteristic strongly parallels present systems of management by objectives. As probably everyone knows, management by objectives is a procedure by which organizational goals are generated from staff members, are written down for superior-subordinate review, are

understandable to all staff members responsible for their implementation, and are achievable. Although issues can be taken of MBO systems, MBO appears to be a very plausible way for a school system to take stock of where it is and where it wants to go. In addition, one of the serious deficiences in school organizational life is the lack of planning that exists among the managerial group. This condition could be potentially remediated by a system of objectives that ties in with the earlier stated assumption that schools must consider what they can do and can't do.

CHARACTERISTIC II.

> What procedures exist that clearly state the mode of evaluation for all organizational members? How well are these procedures and their outcomes understood by all members of the organization?

Essential to organizational health is the ability and desire of an organization to evaluate itself in a systematic fashion. Unfortunately, evaluation in school systems up to this point tends to be superficial and nonproductive. An over-simplication of this condition probably rest in the fact that schools do not know what to evaluate and for what reason. Early evaluation systems, which still exist in many school systems, were predicated on professional mystique representative of a pedagogical mythology that grew out of a profession striving for maturity and stature. Given the establishment of clear cut direction and thrust within the organization, the necessary follow-up of how and what to evaluate could come more easily. However, it is necessary that such an evaluation system be done systematically. By systematic is meant a pre-determined strategy as to what needs to be done, how to do it, who is responsible for what, and the time phasing of the process. Evaluation in

the 70's must be undertaken by Schools themselves in order to insure their own credibility to the public they serve. The simple statement that if you don't do it, somebody else is going to do it for you, seems increasingly realistic.

CHARACTERISTIC III.

> How receptive are organizational members to change? How anticipative are the leaders in your organization to potential outcomes of their behavior? How well do your leaders generate alternative strategies with related consequences for each alternative?

Another characteristic essential to a dynamic organization is its ability and desire to change or alter its behavior. A great deal has been said about lag theories where in education it takes 20-30 years for ideas to be implemented. Schools traditionally have changed as a result of external forces of a political and/or social nature. What should be sought at this point is change resulting from an anticipative attitude on the part of school managers. This requires considerable sophistication regarding existing organizational functions and their amenability to the pressing demands on the schools. As a result of developing the necessary attitude to change, school organizational health could be measured by a process of self-renewal.

The last 3 points direct their attention to the ability of the school system to manage itself. This is a state that schools have always sought but have pursued through a process of defensive behavior. This has resulted from a protective stance due to pressures. What is suggested here is a stance of organizational aggressiveness in determining purpose, and the ability to change for a stated purpose. From dealing with community to the ever pressing demands of organized teachers groups, it is critical for schools to take on a more aggressive stance in sensing its own priorities. This is particularly needed in light of the

conflicting demands and expectations placed upon a school system from all quarters.

CHARACTERISTIC IV.

What vehicles exist within the organization to exert and receive influence from within the different levels of the school systems? How is influence from outside the school system processed?

Essential to an analysis of organizational health, is the way in which influence is received by the organization. In order to make some kind of judgment in this area, it must be established that the influence process is an ever present one. Therefore, it must be faced up to and dealt with in an open and straight forward manner. Several ways of looking at influence in organizations is to understand where it comes from, how frequently it comes about, and the intensity by which it is exerted on organizational members. In addition, it is critical to look at the influence process within the organization. It should be quite clear from the preceding characteristics that influence must be conceived as reciprocal in nature. A school system must insure that influence be processed completely for its own benefit.

In summary, a healthy school organization may be characterized as having the following attributes:

1. Clearly stated purposes and responsibilities.
2. A systematic process for evaluating the functioning.
3. A built-in spirit and attitude toward change.
4. It's ability to utilize influence as a feed-back mechanism for its own growth and development.

As a result of such a definition, school systems could still retain their uniqueness relative to their own situational settings. Procedures for gaining control over the above-stated characteristics would vary from school system to school system. However, the outcome for school systems should be the same, namely its own efficiency and productivity could result in better educational opportunities for the children and community served.

ABSTRACT

Assessing the Organizational Health of School Systems

Jerry J. Cicchelli

In times of economic problems, schools traditionally fall under attack due to their management and/or organizational profiles. School systems can turn such attacks into productive problems of their own organizational structures.

Several assumptions need to be examined regarding their implication for school organizational functioning. Specifically, they are:

1. Client achievement cannot be seen as a major index of the organizational functioning of school systems.
2. Organizational functioning relates closely to the utilization of human and material resources available.
3. Maximizing available resources increases organizational adaptability to change.
4. Schools have limitations and need to recognize same.

A number of characteristics leading to an assessment of organizational health could be:

1. Clearly stated purposes and responsibilities.
2. A Systematic process for evaluating the functioning.
3. A built-in spirit and attitude toward change.
4. It's ability to utilize influence as a feed-back mechanism for its own growth and development.

As a result of such characteristics school systems could still retain their uniqueness relative to their own situational settings. Procedures for gaining control over the above-stated characteristics would vary from school system to school system. However, the outcome for school systems should be the same, namely its own efficiency and productivity could result in better educational opportunities for the children and community served.